

Garden House (Asa Gray House)
88 Garden Street
Cambridge
Middlesex County
Massachusetts

HABS No. MA-1019

HABS
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

GARDEN HOUSE (Asa Gray House)

HABS No. MA-1019

Location: 88 Garden Street, corner of Madison Street, Cambridge,
Middlesex County, Massachusetts.

Present Owner/
Occupant: Mr. and Mrs. Gardner Cox

Present Use: Private residence.

Significance: The Garden House is the earliest known work by architect
Ithiel Town. It was long the home of botanist Asa Gray and
is a National Historic Landmark.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1810-11.
2. Architect and builder: Ithiel Town (1784-1844).
3. Original and subsequent owners:

1810	Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture built house in Harvard College's Botanic Garden (corner of Garden and Linnaean streets).
1910	Allen H. Cox bought land at 88 Garden Street from President and Fellows of Harvard College and moved the Garden House to this lot. Middlesex County Registry of Deeds, Book 3571, p. 201. No record exists in Cambridge for transfer of title after the death of Allen H. Cox.
4. Original plans and construction: Originally connected to a conservatory, also designed and built by Ithiel Town.
5. Alterations and additions: House moved in 1910 by architect Allen Cox from original site in Botanic Garden to 88 Garden Street, across the street. Building Permit 13628, Putnam & Cox, architects, Hugh Murnaghan, builder.

The original front porch, as shown in the 1867 photograph, was a simple lattice-sided enclosing arbor. The upper arch followed the curve of the fanlight over the front door. At some later date, before the house was moved, the present rectangular porch was added, with a somewhat awkward juncture with the house over the fanlight.

The bay window that was formerly at the northeast corner (by present orientation) was moved around to the rear and attached to the new dining room.

The connecting wing and brick chimney that were formerly on the north wall of the study were removed and at some later time a window inserted.

Additions to the rear of the study wing are of an uncertain date.

The shed that was moved with the house was remodeled into a garage and detached living room in 1924, the central part of the roof being raised, and walls extended. Its original purpose is uncertain.

The connection between the study's rear additions and the shed were inserted in about 1928.

The front door of the study, which in old photos has but a simple stone step, was glassed in with a small porch about 1920.

The staircase to the second floor in the study was probably put in by the present owner's father, Allen Cox.

The cabinets in the study were probably on more than one wall, as at present. Some have been moved to the upper rear bedroom.

In the kitchen, the old iron stove was removed and the room remodeled with a new west window ca. 1946.

The sleeping porch on the rear of the study, second floor, was added ca. 1924.

The sewing room on the second floor over the hall was converted to a bathroom ca. 1937.

B. Historical Context:

Built for zoologist William Dandridge Peck, the Garden House was the home of botanist Asa Gray from his appointment as Fisher Professor of Natural History at Harvard College in 1842 until his death in 1888. Responsible for adopting the natural system of plant classification for American plants, Asa Gray published the first complete books on North American flora. He taught botany for many years at Harvard where he became well known for his own work and as one of America's leading defenders of Darwin's theory of evolution.

C. Sources of Information

1. Early views:

Photograph of the house on its original site in Botanic Garden. From 1867 Class Album, Harvard University Archives, portfolio 24, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Copy included with HABS photos.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Graustein, Jeannette, "Natural History at Harvard College, 1788-1842," Cambridge Historical Society, Publications 38 (1959-60): 69-86.

Rettig, Robert Bell, Guide to Cambridge Architecture (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), E44.

Saunderson, Laura D., "The Evolution of Cambridge Heights," Cambridge Historical Society, Publications 38 (1959-60): 116.

D. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated:

Harvard University Arboretum may have interior photographs of house during Gray's occupancy.

Prepared by: Susan E. Maycock
Survey Associate
Cambridge Historical Commission
June, 1969

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This well-preserved Federal house was built in 1810-11 by Ithiel Town and is his earliest dated work.
2. Condition of fabric: Very good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Approximately 40' (five-bay front) x 36' with wing to north-northwest; two stories.

2. Foundations: Squared blocks of gray granite, approximately 18" tall. Rear of house, under kitchen, has rubble masonry instead. Inside basement, walls are rough laid approximately 5', with 2' course of brick above. Brick support pillars. Under two fireplace stacks, brickwork forms a tunnel vault east-west, with corbeled out ends to support. Study wing has no real basement, only clay-filled crawlspace.
3. Walls: The front has a flush siding. Sides and additions have clapboards, 4" wide. Front, sides and additions painted a gray-brown, with window trim, two pilasters, roof balustrade, and cornice painted white; shutters black. Where wall meets foundation is a flared out molding, also painted white. Pilasters are fluted Ionic. The rear walls are clapboard, painted yellow. Corner vertical strips 6" wide.
4. Porches, stoops, bulkheads: The front porch is approximately 5' x 8', reached by five risers. Wood latticed foundation. Square support posts with beveled edges to roof, which has cornice of small modillion-dentils, based on those of roof cornice of house. Side front porch is modern, with dentiled pattern at eaves; glassed in. Rear cellar entrance has seven steps and rough stone walls down to basement door.
5. Chimneys: Two, from center line of roof, midway between peak and edge. Square, massive, plain.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Front door has four panels with sidelights half way down, vertical panel at bottom. Arched overlight of 16 panes.
 - b. Windows and shutters: Front and side windows have six-over-six-light sash on first and second floors. The study wing has six-over-nine-light sash on the first floor, three-over-three-light on the second. The rear windows are the same as on the front, except one in the north room has triple sash.

Shutters on front are painted black, with simple shutter stays, apparently old. Pintles in place on south side, but no shutters; none on wing or rear of house.

7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Hipped roof, covered with gray asbestos shingles. The construction of the roof is easily seen in the attic, and may be significant. The center support is a pillar with eight roughly planed faces, about 12" in diameter. Six rafters, each measuring approximately 7" x 7", are attached, apparently by mortise and tenon at the top and run down to the four corners, and to the middle of each long side. These are supported by beams which are mortised into the central support pillar about 2' from the floor, and staggered so as not to weaken the pillar by uniform cuts around the circumference at one level. These measure about 3-3/4" x 4-3/4" and meet the six rafters about at their mid-points, and thus form an umbrella. Purlins are then laid on the four faces (each purlin measuring about 3" x 5-1/4") in seven rows, from wall plate to apex. At the four corners the rafters are braced by stout pieces of wood forming a right angle; these pieces are about the same size as the rafters. See diagram. The vertically laid roof boards are very wide, some 13".

- b. Cornice, eaves: Cornice of house has dentil-modillions of plain form around four sides, but not wing. Imitated in front porch. Rain gutter concealed in cornice. Roof is surrounded by parapet with alternating rectangular panels and openings with six turned balusters and two engaged. This appears to be a modern copy of the original.

These dentil-modillions may be made of a very hard white ceramic as one was found in the yard, although no space was to be seen in the cornice.

- c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: Small skylight for attic in west slope of roof near apex.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans (see sketch plan): Central hall, divided halfway by door with fanlight, and including front and back stairs. Two rooms on each side of hall. To the right is the study and subsequent wings.
2. Stairways: Cellar stairway is straight run. Front stairway makes a quarter turn with thirteen risers below the landing and two above. Turned newel, square balusters. Rear stairway makes a half turn with winders, fourteen risers. Extra step in middle going out to the later sleeping porch. Dowel balusters. Attic stairway is a straight run.

3. Flooring: Hardwood, 3-3/4" or 3-1/2" wide, seen in old dining room. Halls, parlor, and new dining room are painted in pink and brown imitating marble tiles (this was done within the last five years). Hall boards 2" wide. Kitchen and study covered in linoleum. Some attic boards are 16" wide.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Inside walls seem very thin, about 3-3/4" but masked by a flaring molding around the doors so that this is not apparent. Outside walls are about 13" thick. Plain plaster finish, with some modern wallpaper. New dining room is painted in scenes and figures on plaster, by Allen Cox and his wife. No ceiling medallions. Cornice molding very simple, no more than a picture-hook strip. Ceiling of pantry/china closet only about 8' tall, reeded tongue and groove.
5. Doorways and doors: Most interior doors are six-panel, some four-panel. The pass-through from the kitchen to the old dining room is a three-panel door with the central panel hinged. In the middle of the front hall is a six-panel door with semi-circular fanlight of six panes. Porch door from study is glass. Between old dining room and study is a glass sliding pocket door, of fifteen panes. Simple but flaring moldings surround doors. Forty-five-degree corners, no blocks or ears.
6. Decorative features and trim: Windows have paneled two-wing shutters, in reveals, which carry to floor, with simple iron hooks. Wainscoting 28-1/2" high with 6-1/4" baseboard in old dining room and front parlor. Museum cabinets in study are 17" deep, vertical compartments with slots for different-height shelves are 12" wide or 24" wide. Another set of these, painted white, in southwest bedroom, second floor.
7. Hardware: L-shaped hinges on closet door under front stair. Wrought-iron bolt and gate latch on attic door. Simple brass doorknobs, some oval. Cabinet knobs and locks plain. Old sink in pantry perhaps ca. 1900.
8. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Lighting: Modern electric. Gas butts with stamped flange on stairway.
 - b. Heating: Fireplaces are large, apparently wood-burning. Living room and new dining room fireplaces have lintel and side pieces of dense red sandstone with mica. Simple wood surrounds and mantels with Tuscan half-columns. Old dining room is the same, but converted to coal with metal inset. On the second floor, there are simple wood mantels with reeded surrounds, brick fireplaces and tile hearths. Modern oil heat.

D. Site:

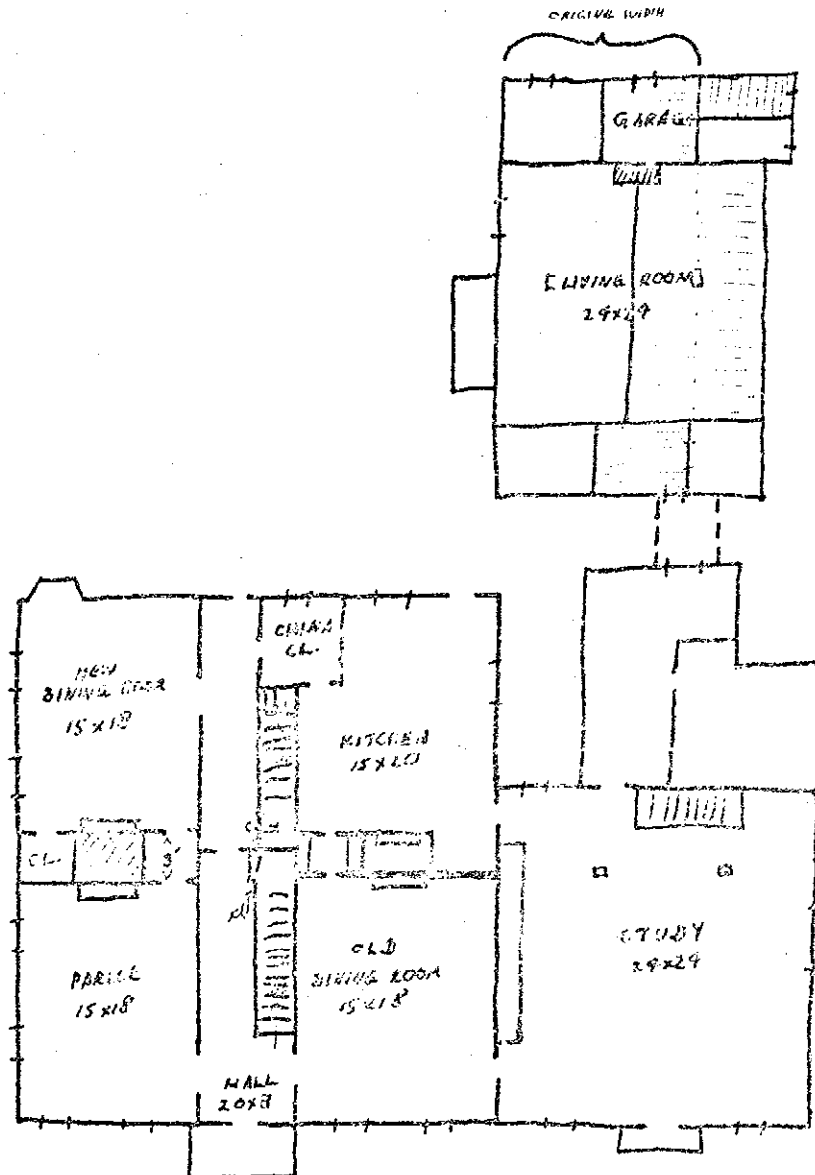
1. General setting and orientation: The house faces north-northeast. To the rear and west are ample yards, with trees.
2. Outbuildings: The shed, mentioned above, was moved with the house and converted into a living room. The central portion of the shed was extended west about 12' (the original dimensions seem to have been about 30' x 12'), and a square bay added on the east, with a fireplace to the south. At the south end another projection was added to house a garage, the rear or east portion of which is closed off as a furnace room for the living room. The north end of the shed was also extended with a flat roof, not gable as the garage, and is half incorporated into the main room, half a side storeroom. This is now connected to the house by a closed walkway.
3. Landscaping: The yard has various trees and bushes, a brick walk across the rear of the house, an arbor to the rear and west of the back yard, old fencing across the front, and more modern fencing on Madison Street.

Prepared by: Daniel D. Reiff
Survey Associate
Cambridge Historical Commission
March, 1968

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared as part of a cooperative project between the Cambridge Historical Commission (CHC), Albert B. Wolfe, Chairman, and the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), National Park Service. The project, initiated in September, 1967, and completed in June, 1969, was under the general direction of Robert Bell Rettig, Associate Survey Director of the CHC, and James C. Massey, Chief, HABS. Susan Maycock, CHC Survey Associate and graduate student in architectural history at Boston University, was responsible for the historical data; the architectural data were written by Daniel D. Reiff, CHC Survey Associate and a Harvard University doctoral candidate in the Department of Fine Arts; and the photographs were taken by George M. Cushing, Boston. Certain data were supplied by Dr. Bainbridge Bunting, CHC Survey Director and Professor of Art and Architectural History at the University of New Mexico. The records were edited by Denys Peter Myers and Alison K. Hoagland, Historians, HABS.

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by Kennedy is now
soft.*

